

The facts get in the way of White House counteroffensive on Iran

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WASHINGTON - It is a chapter right out of the book of Nixon. It has plumbiers, the international types; a failed mission, a phony coverup, and elements of hypocrisy and of stupidity.

The Iranian mission counteroffensive, in command of "prime minister" Donald Regan, the White House chief of staff, has broken down. It has stalled not so much because of external problems, which might have been overcome, but because of internal problems.

Secretary of State George Shultz was aboard for the counteroffensive over the weekend but, by stating the facts on CBS's "Face the Nation," he became a devastating witness against the administration. Piece by piece he took apart President Reagan's address to the nation.

On Thursday night Reagan claimed that since the United States began doing business with the Iranians there has been no evidence that they have engaged in acts of terrorism. Replied Shultz: Not

so: Iran has continued to sponsor terrorism and has been implicated in the recent kidnapping of three Americans.

Then there was the subject of the United States sending arms to Iran. Shultz did not give excuses about moderates in Iran, nor about the prospects for a better relationship with Iran, nor about its strategic position in the world. Would Shultz have sent the arms? "Under the circumstances of Iran's war with Iraq, its pursuit of terrorism, its association with those holding hostages, I would certainly say 'no.'"

When asked if he was speaking for the administration, Shultz replied with a blunt, "No."

Secretaries of state cannot perform in that manner and stay in office.

There was also William Casey, director of central intelligence. You don't catch Casey leaving his plumbiers' tools behind. It turned out that he knew about the operation; knew it might be illegal and took steps to protect himself.

Casey's protective measure was leaked over the weekend. He had Reagan sign a secret presidential intelligence order on

Jan. 17, which directed him not to inform Congress about the arms shipments, news stories said.

Reagan's order absolved Casey from obeying the 1984 directive of Congress that he tell the intelligence committees when the president took actions such as shipping arms to Iran.

Donald Regan, the leader of the counteroffensive, was asked Friday whether it was hypocrisy to tell other nations not to

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send arms to Iran and not to swap hostages for arms and then for the United States to do both.

Regan said: "I think the question is one of degree. Had we armed Iran and sold them 14 boatloads of high-explosive arms or an atomic weapon, then yeah, but [exchanging] spare parts for an anti-aircraft battery or antitank missile in order to get a dialogue started that would lead to the cessation of terrorism, is that a good trade-off?"

Only if Col. Oliver North, the White House "Rambo," developed pangs of conscience and came clean before a Senate or House committee on what he has been doing in Iran, Nicaragua and Israel could things have gone worse for the White House. North may be Reagan's John Dean, the White House counsel who did in Richard Nixon.

It is far from over. The Shultz statements on television and the Casey story are only a preview of what is to come for the Reagan administration. Casey goes to bat before Congress on Friday, when he is scheduled to testify in private. He will undoubtedly have the secret Reagan order to absolve himself of any responsibility toward Congress.

Shultz will make appearances later before Congress in what will be open sessions for the nation to watch.

The Reagan case in Iran rests on two legs, each equally shaky. The first is that the Iranian mission was not a hostage swap at all. The second is that it was

done to improve relations with "moderates" in Iran.

The first point needs no comment except that it is obviously false.

As to point two, Robert McFarlane, the former national security adviser who cooked up this scheme, now says that the "moderates" he did business with in Tehran might now be in danger of execution.

As MacFarlane should know, no faction in Iran can be trusted. Some faction there fingered his mission and blew its cover by publicizing a report in a Lebanese magazine.

The image of Iran in the United States is not easily erased; it is one of violent anti-Americanism, of state-supported terrorism, of wringing out this nation in the hostage crisis.

Now the president and those around him are trying to sell the idea there are really some nice folks over there and that they have a chance at power in Iran against the forces of Khomeini. That is going to be a very tough sell.

Robert Healy is an associate editor of the Globe.